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SUBJECT: LAF COMMANDER SLEIMAN ON THE PRESIDENCY

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a 7/27 meeting with the Ambassador and DATT that concentrated mostly on the fighting in Nahr al-Barid (septel), Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman also spoke briefly of Lebanon's upcoming presidential elections. The Ambassador raised concerns that remarks attributed to Sleiman about resigning if there were a second cabinet or a vacancy in the presidency. The Ambassador noted that this implied a threat, that the army would be the next national institution paralyzed. (Note: Should Sleiman step down, Chief of Staff Shawki Masri would be Acting Commander. But, as a Druse allied with Walid Jumblatt and bereft of any perceptible leadership qualities, Masri is incapable of keeping the LAF together. End note.)

¶2. (C) Sleiman insisted that his remarks had been misinterpreted. Noting that he was quoted second-hand in the media by those who had met with him, Sleiman said that, in order to preserve the unity of the army, he would not in fact submit his resignation until he was certain that a smooth presidential transition was underway. But he is not making that commitment public. To the extent that his remarks were a threat, they were intended to frighten people into making sure that a president is elected on time and according to the constitution. His remarks add to the pressure in favor of presidential elections.

¶3. (C) As for his own ambitions, Sleiman acknowledged the Ambassador's comment that his name is often mentioned as a potential compromise candidate. Sleiman emphasized that his highest priority is to ensure the unity and continuation of the LAF. If he is asked to serve as a compromise presidential candidate, he will readily serve his country. But his presidential goals are secondary to his commitment to the LAF. For the same reasons, he categorically rejected the suggestion that he would accept being head of a second cabinet or serving (a la Michel Aoun in 1988-90) a Maronite Prime Minister over a cabinet that would hold the presidential powers until such time as presidential elections could be organized.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador noted that MP Michel Murr is peddling the idea of a two-year presidency as a way out of what appears to be an impending deadlock over how to fill the normal six-year presidential term. Sleiman said that his view differed from Murr's. For the president to have sufficient weight and authority, he should be elected for the full six-year term. However, perhaps the president could quietly agree before his election that, if the 2009 parliamentary elections radically change the composition of

the parliament, the president could resign after only two years, in order to allow the new parliament to elect a new president that reflects the new popular will.

15. (C) Briefly channeling Michel Aoun, Sleiman responded to the Ambassador's question about Hizballah by noting that Lebanon's Christians and Shia need to stick together. Both are minorities trying to preserve their place in a Sunni-dominated region. Unlike the Sunnis, the Christians and Shia have no place else to go, he argued. The Ambassador responded that Lebanon has a cosmopolitan, moderate Sunni class including prominent leaders such as PM Fouad Siniora, who are as Lebanese in spirit as the Christians and Shia. Sleiman readily agreed.

16. (C) Comment: Sleiman made some reassuring comments in this meeting: his categorical rejection of the idea of heading a second cabinet, his refusal to become prime minister (a la Michel Aoun) in the absence of presidential elections, and his stated commitment not to resign from the LAF (his quoted remarks notwithstanding) until a presidential transition is assured. What we do not know is how sincerely those comments reflect his true intentions, or, even if they do, whether he would muster the will to refuse Syrian orders (as he reportedly did in allowing the March 14, 2005 anti-Syrian demonstration to take place). Sleiman's current links to Syria remain somewhat of a mystery, but there are sufficient rumors to worry us. We remember -- and not fondly -- the public remarks he made in April 2005 when the Syrian army left Lebanon and in August 2006 when the LAF started its historic deployment to the south. Neither set of remarks would win him any friends in the pro-independence camp. He would not, in short, be our first choice for president, although, buoyed by Nahr al-Barid fight and the public

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solidarity behind the LAF, he is rapidly becoming a front-runner. End comment.
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